

Review of TAD C1000
by Graig Neville, 03/2024, on :



TAD C1000 Preamplifier (& Friends)



Technical Audio Devices debuted the TAD C1000 preamplifier at **Capital Audiofest** this past November, and I was excited to be the first in the queue to get my hands on this new piece of kit. But first I'll offer a little history lesson on this known but relatively unknown brand.

TAD was the in-house R&D department for Pioneer, and in 1975 the division started to create high-end professional speakers. Bart Locanthi provided technical advice, his philosophical goals were that “genuine technology is true to the basics and that genuine technology places greater importance on sound quality than on technology for its own sake.” TAD’s goal was to produce products true to the musicians’ intentions and to deliver “a truly immersive, soul-stirring music-listening experience.”

Words and Photos by **Graig Neville**

In 2007, TAD spun off to become its own company and began developing electronics to support their line of speakers. This includes CD players, DACs, amplifiers and preamplifiers—such as the TAD C1000. The electronics, by the way, are targeted at both the professional and consumer markets. I had the opportunity to speak with President Shinji Tarutani, and he explained how TAD's slogan—“The Artistic Intent, Intact,” speaks to more than just accurate sound reproduction. The focus is preservation of the musical structure and the artist's expression.

Tarutani-san has been with Pioneer over 30 years, starting as a mechanical engineer at Pioneer developing housings and mechanisms for home audio products. In 2009 he moved to TAD, where he was responsible for housing designs for several amp models. He is proud and passionate about TAD and strives to make the best products possible. While measurements and specifications are important, each TAD product also undergoes comprehensive listening tests to ensure that the artist's intent remains intact. TAD has been supporting the professional industry most of its nearly 50 years of existence, but there has been a push to promote the consumer products over the last few years. Dave Malekpour, president and founder of **PAD Hifi** (Pro Audio Design), is the new distributor. PAD is an interesting company as they build studios as well as market TAD for North America, so they are both pro and consumer distributors.

TAD still makes compression drivers and horns for the pro market, but the company evolved by using more conventional dynamic drivers for their consumer products. TAD has three lines, Professional, Reference, and Evolution, with the Reference acting as the flagship consumer line. The Evolution line embodies the DNA of TAD but at a less eye-watering price point. The TAD C1000 preamplifier is part of the Evolution series.



Inside the TAD C1000 Preamplifier

As I had “first dibs” reviewing the TAD C1000, I wondered how TAD would sound with non-TAD equipment. All of my impressions of TAD were mostly based on reputation, and the few occasions I actually heard TAD systems was at high-end audio shows. I always walked away impressed. (At the 2023 CAF I had a bit more time to peruse the two TAD rooms. You can get my impressions [here](#).)

After conversations with the TAD distribution team, I suggested that I could review the C1000 preamplifier alone, but I also wanted TAD to put their best foot forward so they offered up the M1000 amplifier and D1000TX CD player/DAC. Heck yeah I was excited to listen to the full TAD electronics stack! Once I unpacked the gear and plugged everything in I got to work as PAD needed the gear back in time for the Florida Audio Show.

The Evolution gear all has a similar aesthetic. (“Robocop” has been tossed about as a descriptor.) The TAD C1000, with its big central volume knob that is taut and weighty enough for the knob-feel crowd, does look a bit HAL 9000-ish. However, that does not really do justice to the fit and finish of these products. Everything about the layout of the back panel, the hidden front buttons, and the function is well thought-out and impeccably executed. The brushed aluminum with black top plate is the only finish I’ve seen, but there is also a black finish available.



These are all from the S series—for example C1000-S, which I assume stands for silver (or its Japanese equivalent). There is a K model available (black) for each product which is available via special order. The TAD electronics have an industrial design that is rugged and well executed. However, the finish isn't where the TAD C1000 struts its stuff.

Connectivity on the TAD C1000 was bountiful, with a myriad of connections for sources—it should have enough inputs for any audiophile. With four XLR and two RCA inputs and a whopping four outputs (two XLR and two RCA), the C1000 should be the command center for any audiophile system, no matter how complicated. (There are also 12V triggers to slave other TAD electronics.)

Trickle-down DNA from the TAD Reference series C600 was put into the new C1000. This includes single-stage current feedback amplification minimizing the use of amplification elements in the flat amplifier section. The first-stage JFETs are matched on both the positive and negative elements. The TAD C1000 is fully symmetrical including the board layout, use of two power supplies, and even the rear panel layout and chassis weight are symmetrical to ensure that both the left and right signal paths are identical in every way. (This is also why the volume knob is centered on the unit.) The transformer is directly connected to the power supply circuit and the control and amplification sections are separated with their own dedicated transformers. Vibration of the chassis has also been considered, with special spiked feet integrated into the design.

On the specification side, the TAD C1000 can output an ear liquifying maximum of 8Vrms unbalanced or 16Vrms balanced, but is rated at 0.8V and 1.6V respectively. Gain is a healthy 12db with 0.003% THD and 120db signal to noise ratio. The C1000 can handle inputs up to 7V unbalanced or 16V balanced. There shouldn't be anything that you can plug into this beast that should cause any issues unless you are really trying to break something on purpose.

The M1000 amplifier and D1000 CD player, though not the subject of this review, warrant a brief description. The M1000 is a 500W per channel into 4Ω Class D powerhouse. Despite being class D, the M1000 still weighs in at a hefty 64lbs and uses MOSFETs. The D1000 CD player will play SACDs and can also serve as a stand-alone DAC. The D1000 has an in-house developed asynchronous USB communication engine and can accommodate up to 384kHz or DSD256. TAD approaches their DACs a bit differently than others, and I was interested to see how it affected the sound compared to my reference **LampizatOr**.

All this effort ain't cheap, and the TAD C1000 weighs in at \$24,950. The associated M1000 amplifier is \$19,500 and the D1000 CD player is \$15,000. With nearly \$60k in electronics, my expectations were high...but does TAD deliver?



Gut Punch

The word *visceral* is the best description for the sound that the TAD C1000, M1000, and D1000 brought to my system. From the moment I turned on the system the TAD was a musical assault on the senses. Dynamics were Mike-Tyson-head-butt with a fierce upper cut. My new **Triangle Magellan Quatuors** don't shake the walls like my old **Vandersteen** Model 3s but the TAD stack, orchestrated by the TAD C1000, gave me that gut punch bass, shake-the-floor experience. We're talking room pressurizing bass with deep authority, and presence and speed was also on tap. I was in a punch-drunk musical coma.

How TAD combined the speed and control with such an immense amount of dynamics and transient attack is mind blowing. I think the TAD speakers must be considerably more damped than my Triangles as I don't recall the visceral impact being so immense at CAF.

The rest of the sound was smooth but interesting. I never felt that anything was added to the music that didn't belong. The feeling was more a shock—there was that much music buried in the recording that I had never heard before. I could hear the skin on the kick drum snap on the leading edge of the notes that made percussion instruments sound more real than I think I've ever heard on any system. The sound was definitively solid state, there was no attempt to bring any tubiness into the mix, but this is approaching summit-fi levels of solid state. Solid state can sound dry, boring, or clinical, but not so with the TAD C1000, M1000, and D1000 playing in concert.



My system had a clarity that I've not experienced before. For example, whispers in the background that I couldn't quite understand before were now understandable. Choral music transformed from a wall of glommed-together voices into a chorus of individual singers. I couldn't pick out each singer, but I could detect the tonality of a group of individuals instead of an amalgamated wall of sound. It was bonkers.

The TAD C1000 led system had a U-shaped soundstage that started just outside the back of the speakers and ended about three feet behind the plane of the speakers in the center, kind of like a traditional orchestra layout. This is very different than my reference system, which has a more forward 3D holographic image that hangs in space about one or two feet in front of the system. Instrument placement in the soundstage was precise and instruments were easy to locate in space.

The system was happy playing at low levels as well as loudly. Micro-details were perceptible even at low volumes and the overall character of the sound never changed. The listening floor was dead quiet. Music leapt from a black hole and faded back to utter blackness. This felt perfectly natural as decay was as great as the transient attack. Perhaps decay was just a tad faster than expected, but it could also be that other gear I've had in the system is just slower to decay. This quality was apparent on both electronic and acoustic music and brought a level of belief to the musical experience. This allowed me to see more into the studio than with my reference system. If I had the requisite studio/recording knowledge I could have detected microphone choices, the mixing engineer's choices, etc. It was a crystal clear view from the recording studio into the music session.

The TAD C1000 and the other TAD gear squeezed micro-details out of the recording like a 10-ton press squeezing a ripe lemon. There was just so much more nuanced information extracted that I didn't hear on recordings before this. Though the bass captured my initial impressions, the treble and midrange were both superb. Cymbals crashed like cymbals and could cause you to jump when you weren't expecting them. I mentioned the midrange clarity above—vocals, in particular, sounded natural and clear.



TAD C1000 Listening Sessions

Right now I have the **Michell Gyro SE turntable** and cartridge for vinyl playback, along with my **Rega P3** turntable with **Mofi Silver** cartridge. The TAD C1000 really brought out the difference between analog and digital, in my opinion. That little analog something that vinyl brings to my system was transformative, especially with the Michell. The sound was so satisfying and so bountiful that it was like eating fine French cuisine with a shovel. In some ways it was a bit too much, and I suspect that a somewhat more damped speaker than the Quatuor would dial it back from 11 to a more manageable perfect 10. But Oh My God was it glorious to hear.

It was obvious that TAD designed the C1000, M1000, and D1000 to work harmoniously together, but I wanted to focus in on what the TAD C1000 specifically sounded like and what it brought to the system, so I had to break up the band. First I removed the TAD C1000 from the system and replaced it with my reference **Backert Rhumba Extreme**. The C1000 immediately proved to be lightning quick in comparison to the Backert. As much as I love the Backert it seemed ponderously slow in comparison, which also softened the visceral impact of the dynamics.

The Backert did have a fuller and more engaging soundstage with 3D holographic imaging and body around instruments than the TAD C1000. But the C1000 was also clearer than the Backert. The sound of striking matches on Mannheim Steamroller's *Fresh Aire 4* sounded more like real matches on the C1000. The Backert added a some tube juice to the system, which suites my personal tastes, but at over three times the price I had higher expectations for the TAD C1000 and I was not disappointed. (TAD had mentioned that the new C1000 is so good that they need to go back and revisit the Reference C600.)

Finally, I compared the D1000 to the LampizatOr Golden Tube Atlantic TRD, both with and without the TAD C1000 in the system. The LampizatOr added some more tube juice to the experience, which further improved soundstage and image bloom, but perhaps at the cost of some clarity and refinement. The D1000, by the way, has a spectacular DAC. I did compare digital to vinyl on a few albums. This included Mannheim Steamroller's *Fresh Aire 4* and Crosby, Stills, and Nash and Young's *Déjà Vu*. In both cases the vinyl sounded better than digital, but I think this is more to do with these CDs being older '90s versions where "bits are bits" and the transfer of digital was not given the attention to detail it deserved. For example, the striking of the matches on *Fresh Aire 4* was in the right channel on vinyl and the left channel on digital.

Digital could have some treble hash on some recordings, the TAD D1000 was not forgiving on poor recordings or transfers. However, well recorded music was exemplary. Waterfalls sounded like waterfalls and well-done modern digital recordings were immersive and spectacular.



TAD C1000 Preamplifier Conclusions

I think TAD has captured the essence of neutrality with the C1000 preamplifier, married to sheer musicality. The sound has no discernible colorations, with connotations of neutrality. The flavor of neutrality that TAD has pursued has a definite character and I think that character is dynamic. The visceral, fast transient attacks, deep authoritative bass that is still lightning quick and punchy, and the clarity of the midrange transcends neutral becoming musical purity. TAD squeezes the last micro drops of essence from the recordings in a compelling way.

With the TAD C1000 there isn't any tube warmth, nor a darkness or smoothness that some gear creates. The TAD C1000 is lightning-quick and a stellar component in its own right, as are the M1000 and D1000. I think the C1000 and D1000 are the stars of the show, each on their own easily earning a 9.5 out of 10 on my score card. However, when you add the C1000, M1000, and D1000 together you are elevating the system above each individual component to something truly special. Each component builds on the strengths of the others that, as cliché as it sounds is greater than the sum of its parts. This shouldn't be surprising as TAD has purposely designed their products to function this way.

The TAD C1000 + friends is the closest gear that I've heard where I felt like I was looking into the studio. If you want a transcendental experience you owe it to yourself to give it a listen. If you want purity of music, TAD is your endgame.

